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Defense Estimative Brief

US-China Military Relations: Implications of the Ship Visit Issue (U)

Key Judgments

The long-term development of a US-China military relationship probably will not be harmed seriously by the cancellation on 12 May 1985 of the planned visit of three US Navy warships to Shanghai. If US-China military technology programs make steady progress to the satisfaction of the Chinese, the ship visit issue might even drift indefinitely.

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which believes the military relationship is "moving too fast," will retain a key role in reinstating the visit. We believe that Foreign Ministry officials do not intend permanently to prevent a visit, but will block it until they consider the time appropriate for one, thereby influencing the pace of the military relationship.

The so-called sovereignty issue and Chinese reluctance to accept the US "neither confirm nor deny" policy regarding the presence or absence of nuclear weapons aboard visiting US Navy ships will remain serious impediments to any efforts to have a ship visit.

Although some Chinese military officials desire a courtesy portcall as a demonstration of goodwill, they apparently lack the power or the will to overrule the Foreign Ministry on a question of sovereignty.

We believe the US-China military relationship has reached a point where it can withstand minor setbacks without damaging the prospects for continued overall progress.

[REDACTED]

Discussion

1. [REDACTED] The long-term development of a US-China military relationship probably will not be harmed seriously by the cancellation on 12 May 1985 of the planned visit of three US Navy warships to Shanghai. Aware that a continued controversy over this issue might hinder progress in desired military technology transfers, Chinese government officials will continue their efforts to minimize the damage to other aspects of the relationship, while adopting a low-key approach to a resumption of the visit. They probably will continue to express the hope that naval ship visits can occur at some appropriate time in the future.

2. [REDACTED] We judge the immediate responsibility for cancelling the ship visit lies with the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), which believes the developing military relationship is "moving too fast". An ongoing bureaucratic controversy between the MFA and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for control of the military relationship may have been a critical contributing factor. If so, the MFA may have scuttled the visit in order to gain control over the developing military relationship and to slow its pace.

3. [REDACTED] Senior PLA leaders probably were not especially interested in such an event anyway and were satisfied to avoid such a manifestation of an overt military involvement with the United States. When the MFA decided to make the ship visit a foreign affairs issue, high-level PLA leaders probably did not press the subject, even though some elements of the PLA, especially the Navy, sought the visit as a visible demonstration of goodwill conducive to promoting technology transfers.

4. [REDACTED] We believe the MFA assumed control over the ship visit negotiations with the United States by capitalizing on the so-called sovereignty issue--the MFA's proper domain of bureaucratic responsibility--raised in a press conference statement by Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang on 11 April 1985. Hu alleged that China had received US assurances that the visiting ships would not be nuclear armed, and stated that such an agreement was essential to meet China's sovereignty requirements. This position was directly in conflict with US policy on ship visits, which is to neither confirm nor deny (NCND) the presence or absence of nuclear weapons aboard visiting US Navy ships.

5. [REDACTED] We are uncertain whether Hu's surfacing of this issue was part of a deliberate move orchestrated by the MFA, or was simply a misstatement of a position that, once established by Hu, could not be easily changed because it would be inadmissible for the Party leader to admit to having made a mistake.

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6. [REDACTED] In any case, the key obstacle on which the negotiations for the visit foundered on 12 May 1985 was the sovereignty issue. The MFA insisted that the PRC must receive an assurance that any US Navy ship which calls at Chinese ports does not carry nuclear weapons, since the absence of such an assurance would be considered an infringement of China's sovereignty. The MFA took the position that the United States was attempting to impose its NCND policy on China. We believe the Chinese will remain adamant on this issue.

7. [REDACTED] We believe China's position on the US NCND policy was not clearly formulated before Hu's iteration to reporters on 10 April. Hu's decision to raise the sovereignty issue at that point may have been spontaneous, thereby forcing the Chinese government to clarify its position on this subject. In any case, the Chinese showed no appreciation for US sensitivity regarding the potential ramifications of the NCND policy worldwide. Therefore, they insisted that if the United States were to restate publicly that it does not provide assurances anywhere regarding nuclear weapons aboard its ships, this would imply that China had acquiesced to the US NCND position and would therefore be "totally unacceptable." Efforts to find a formula to reach a compromise or otherwise avoid this issue failed. We believe the sovereignty question will be a sticking point in any future negotiations.

8. [REDACTED] Implications for the United States. We judge the Chinese will continue to place first priority on developing beneficial military technology cooperation programs and will concentrate on keeping these programs on track. Moreover, the Chinese do not consider a goodwill visit by naval warships to be an essential part of the US-China military relationship, although they recognize the symbolism of such an event. As a result, the Chinese will be in no hurry to reach a settlement of outstanding differences on issues raised by the ship visit controversy. Rather, they will avoid negotiations that could simply revive a potentially contentious and hence damaging subject.

9. [REDACTED] Despite the interest in a ship visit demonstrated by some elements of the Chinese military, the MFA will retain a key role in reinstating it because of its predominant authority in dealing with sovereignty issues. Although some Chinese military officials desire a courtesy portcall as a demonstration of goodwill, they apparently lack the power or the will to overrule the Foreign Ministry on a question of sovereignty.

10. [REDACTED] We judge that Chinese sensitivities on matters affecting perceived principles of sovereignty will remain a serious impediment to any US ship visit. MFA officials, in particular, will have difficulty accepting any formula for resolving the issue which implies Chinese acceptance of the NCND policy. We believe, moreover, that the MFA will be

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reluctant to accept responsibility for the ship visit cancellation and will continue to contend that the United States cancelled the visit. Beijing will therefore continue to expect the United States to satisfy Chinese sensitivities on matters of sovereignty.

11. [REDACTED] We believe, however, that the MFA does not intend permanently to prevent a visit. Rather, MFA officials will use the sovereignty issue to block it until they consider the time appropriate for one. At that time, they may become more amenable to working out an acceptable formula that will meet China's sovereignty requirements. In effect, the MFA will attempt to control the timing of the visit, thereby influencing the pace of the military relationship. We expect a resumption of negotiations for a ship visit will not be likely before early next year.

12. [REDACTED] In any such negotiations, previously asserted Chinese claims--the United States was trying to impose its NCND policy on China, was uncooperative in not demonstrating the flexibility to meet Chinese sovereignty requirements, and was therefore responsible for cancelling the visit--probably will reemerge as major themes. The Chinese probably will use such charges as a bargaining tactic aimed at gaining concessions from the United States, thereby attempting to make the United States pay a price to reinstate the visit.

13. [REDACTED] We believe the Chinese perception of the potential impact of a naval ship visit on China's overall foreign relations will continue to be an important factor in any future consideration of such a visit. Chinese leaders will wish to avoid projecting an image of a close military relationship with the United States in order to maintain China's credentials as an independent power.

14. [REDACTED] The Chinese will be particularly anxious to avoid giving the Soviet Union the impression that US-China military ties are rapidly expanding. In Chinese eyes, this would dampen prospects for improvement in Sino-Soviet relations. On the other hand, the Chinese will wish to avoid creating an impression of a potentially divisive rift in US-China relations that could undermine Chinese leverage in any prospective negotiations with Moscow, or conversely provide Moscow with an opportunity to exacerbate US-China differences. For these reasons, we believe Beijing will continue to minimize its differences with Washington over the ship visit and will eventually signal an intent to reinstate it.

15. [REDACTED] We believe that Chinese perceptions of improving Soviet-North Korean ties also will become increasingly significant in Chinese calculations about the value of a US warship visit to China. From the Chinese perspective, such a demonstration of developing US-China military relations could

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prompt North Korean leaders to justify additional steps toward closer military cooperation with the USSR, a development the Chinese would want to forestall. If Soviet-North Korean military cooperation were to expand significantly, the Chinese would be more receptive to closer military relations with the United States and Japan. The recent unprecedented call by three Soviet warships at a North Korean port could make Chinese leaders more amenable to a US Navy warship visit to China as a reminder to Moscow and Pyongyang that closer Soviet-North Korean military ties will only encourage Beijing to cooperate more closely with Washington. An expected Japanese naval courtesy call to a Chinese port this fall will serve to demonstrate the same point.

16. [REDACTED] Although Beijing could choose to identify itself with New Zealand in its controversy with the United States, we believe Beijing more likely will attempt to distance itself from Wellington's position on the ground that an issue between alliance partners is irrelevant for states that are merely friendly. Regardless of what position China takes, some Chinese leaders likely will perceive the US application of its policy as arrogant superpower behavior. We expect, however, that Beijing will avoid publicizing such inflammatory rhetoric in order to promote a healthy long-term relationship.

17. [REDACTED] We expect that top-level decisions, possibly by the State Council or the Party General Secretariat, will be required to modify the positions already taken on the key sovereignty issue. On-going disagreements among top leaders regarding the scope and pace of developing US-China security ties could complicate any new moves to raise the ship visit issue. Moreover, we judge that such a decision will be increasingly difficult to make on the eve of major leadership changes expected to be decided upon at a special party conference in September.

18. [REDACTED] The passage of time will be required to enable China to alter its position without an attendant loss of prestige for Party General Secretary Hu. The Chinese will continue to be sensitive to such matters in any future efforts to reinstate the ship visit. However, we believe they will not allow this problem to remain an insurmountable obstacle and that Hu's dignity can be upheld through appropriate courtesies.

19. [REDACTED] The cancellation of the planned US Navy ship visit will not, by itself, derail the overall course of US-China military relations. If US-China military technology transfer programs continue to progress steadily, to the satisfaction of the Chinese, the ship visit issue might even drift indefinitely without resolution. Even if this were to occur, high-level visits and other forms of military exchanges probably would not be discouraged, and the Chinese would continue to pursue a

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cautious military relationship aimed at facilitating the acquisition of military technology. In time, the ship visit issue may become increasingly insignificant.

20. [REDACTED] In sum, we believe the US-China military relationship has reached a point where it can withstand such setbacks without damaging the prospects for continued overall progress.

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